

Population and family characteristics

Background measures, such as family structure, the marital status of mothers, the nativity of children and their parents, and air quality, tell us about the context in which our Nation's children live.

In 2002, 72.9 million children under age 18 lived in the United States and represented 25 percent of the population, down from a peak of 36 percent at the end of the baby boom in 1964. Children are projected to be 24 percent of the population in 2020.

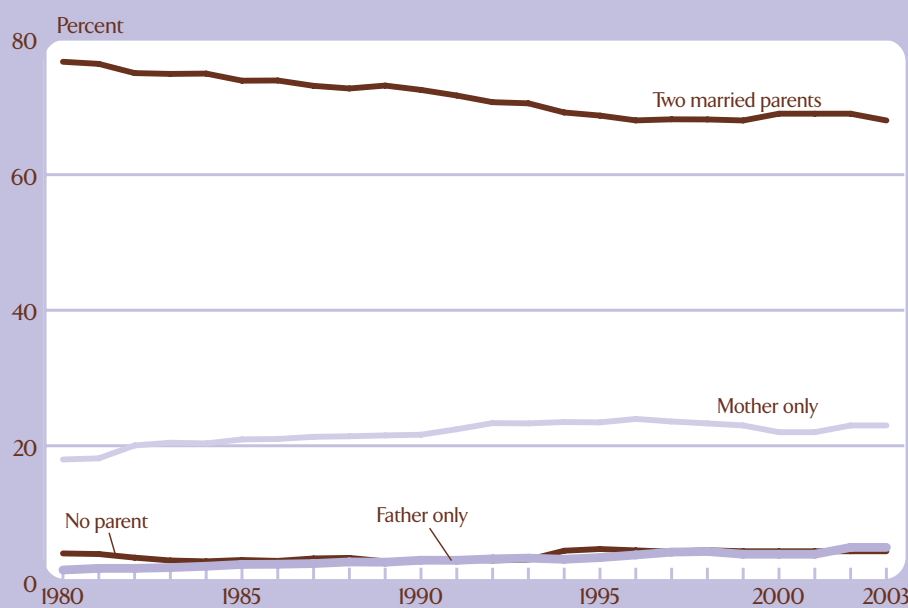
Family structure is associated with the economic, parental, and community resources available to children, as well as their overall well-being. On average, living with two parents who are married to each other is associated with more favorable outcomes for children both through, and independent of, the higher income that characterizes these families.¹ In 2003, 68 percent of children under age 18 lived with two married parents,² down from 77 percent in 1980. However, the percentage has remained stable since 1995, ending a long-standing downward trend.

While the majority of children live with two married parents, 32 percent do not. In 2003, 23 percent of children lived with only their mothers, 5 percent lived with only their fathers, and 4 percent lived with neither of their parents (Figure 1).

Family structure is also affected by a mother's marital status at the time of birth. In 2002, just over one-third (34 percent) of all births in the United States were to unmarried women,

FIGURE 1

Percentage of children under age 18 by presence of married parents in the household, 1980-2003



NOTE: The category "two married parents" includes children who live with a biological, step, or adoptive parent who is married with his or her spouse present. If a second parent is present and not married to the first parent, then the child is identified as living with a single parent.

SOURCE: U.S. Census Bureau. Current Population Survey, March and Annual Social Economic Supplements.

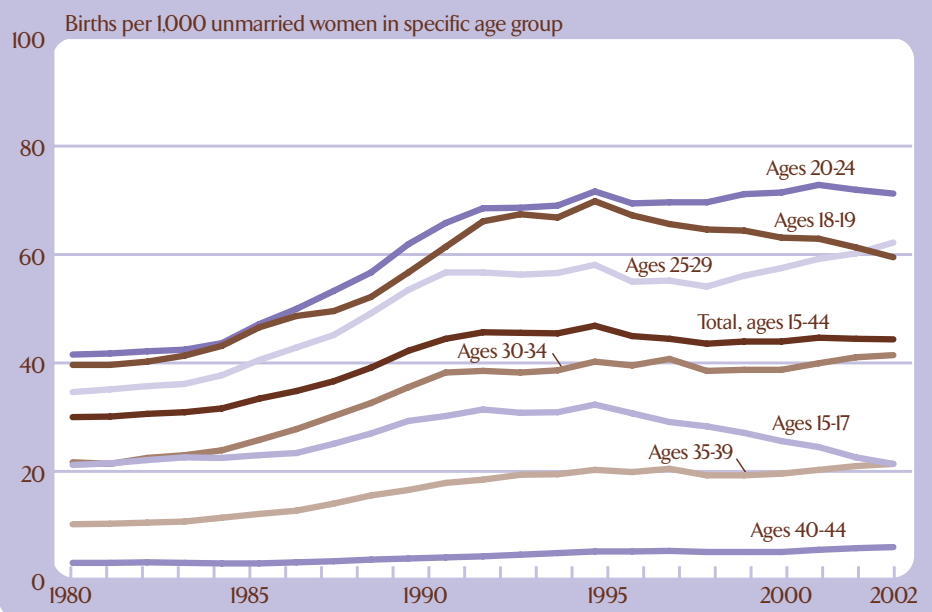
¹ Biblarz, T.J. and Raferty, A.E. (1999). Family Structure, Educational Attainment, and Socioeconomic Success: Rethinking the Pathology of Matriarchy. *American Journal of Sociology*, 105 (2), 321-365.

² In these data, children in step-families are not differentiated from children in biological or adoptive two-parent families. Research indicates that children in step-families are more at risk than children in other married two-parent families. Coleman, M., Ganong, L., and Fine, M. (2000). Reinvestigating Remarriage: Another Decade of Progress. *Journal of Marriage and the Family* 62: 1288-1307.

up from 32 percent in 1995. In part, this recent increase mirrors the fact that there are more unmarried women ages 15-44 than ever before.

The birth rate among unmarried women reflects changes in childbearing within this group. In 2002, there were 44 births per 1,000 unmarried women ages 15 to 44 (Figure 2). While the overall birth rate among unmarried women has changed little since 1995, there are important differences by age. The birth rate for unmarried teenagers ages 15 to 19 has declined by more than one-fifth since 1994. Meanwhile, birth rates for unmarried women ages 20 and older continue to increase, though much less rapidly than in the 1980s and early 1990s.

FIGURE 2 Birth rates for unmarried women by age of mother, 1980-2002



SOURCE: Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, National Center for Health Statistics. National Vital Statistics System.

Children with foreign-born parents may need additional resources at school and at home as a result of language and cultural barriers confronting both the children themselves and their parents. The percentage of children with at least one foreign-born parent rose from 15 percent in 1994 to 20 percent in 2003.

Among all U.S. children, 15 percent have a parent who has not received a high school diploma. This percentage rises substantially among children who are foreign-born or have at least one foreign-born parent. In 2003, 43 percent of foreign-born children with at least one foreign-born parent and 34 percent of native children with at least one foreign-born parent had a parent with less than a high school diploma, compared with 10 percent of native children with native parents.

The environment in which children live, such as air quality, plays an important role in their health and development. In 2002, 34 percent of children under 18 lived in areas that did not meet one or more of the Primary National Ambient Air Quality Standards,³ up significantly from 19 percent in 2001. Over the past decade, this percentage has fluctuated between 16 percent and 34 percent.

³ The air quality standard for ground-level ozone is the standard exceeded most frequently in each year. Changing weather patterns (e.g., high summer temperatures) contribute to yearly differences in ozone concentrations.